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Teacher Attrition: Listening to Teachers to Find a Solution

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Teaching is an incredibly challenging profession and the need for qualified, effective, and passionate teachers continues to increase. This is true even in years of economic downturn, when the role of a teacher becomes even more pivotal in providing knowledge and training to the next generation of the American workforce. However, while there is no question that the charge of educators is vital, research shows us that many of our novice teachers choose to exit the field while still in the early stages of their careers. At one time, many teachers spent 30 or more years in the classroom; this is a trend which is seemingly becoming more of the exception than the norm. "A teaching career in the United States is now down to eleven years," (Haberman, 2005, p. 336).

Teacher Attrition

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF; 2003) believes that 14% of teachers leave the profession after the first year. According to a study by Ingersoll and Smith (2003), almost one out of every two new teachers leaves the classroom by the end of five years of teaching, and in some districts across the nation, as many as one third of all new teachers leave after their first year (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005). Minarik, Thorton, and Perreault (2003) also reported that 50 percent of teachers leave the profession after five years. Boe and colleagues (2008) found that almost one quarter of public school teachers leave teaching, change teaching areas, or migrate to a different school each year. Even more alarming, a recent NCTAF report (2009) forecasts that more than one-third of the current teaching force are eligible to retire over the next four years. Regardless of the actual numbers, the truth remains: teachers are leaving the field at a time when the best and brightest teachers are desperately needed and their services and expertise are invaluable. These statistics, though not new revelations, present some critical questions: In what areas are we failing our teachers? What can be done to help support and sustain the teachers in the classroom?

When teachers leave a school system, the process of hiring new teachers must begin. When schools lose quality teachers, this turnover can cause lowered morale in those teachers who remain in their teaching positions. Teachers who choose to stay are often affected by the same conditions as their colleagues who leave. Therefore, it is vital to give educators opportunities to renew their enthusiasm and vigor for the teaching profession (Williams, 2003).

It is important to note that teacher attrition does not only affect teachers. Everyone associated with the school system is affected by teacher turnover, including students, parents, and tax payers (NCTAF, 2009). The cost of losing teachers continues to rise. Monies that should be directed to student programs must go to the recruitment and professional development of new teachers within the district. Hiring and educating new teachers puts a financial burden on the district and keeps resources from those who most need them: the students (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). The estimated cost per teacher lost ranges from approximately \$4,300 in a small rural district to nearly \$20,000 in a large urban district (NCTAF, 2007). NCTAF also estimates that the national cost of teacher turnover in public schools will be over 7 billion dollars a year. However, even with all the calculated costs, it is difficult to measure the impact that teacher attrition has on a child's learning experience.

The mandates for student achievement are continuing to rise, and in this age of accountability, school systems will continue to face a difficult situation if quality teachers must constantly be replaced. The loss of experienced teachers within a school district can have a tremendous impact on student achievement because it is the students who most suffer when teacher turnover occurs and they are left with inexperienced teachers (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005). Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy (2001) found that effective and well prepared teachers have the largest impact on student learning. Research has also confirmed that students who have an ineffective teacher during any school year may test as much as one year behind students taught by a more effective teacher (Sanders, 1996). The consequences of having ineffective teachers are most often felt in high-poverty schools where teacher turnover rates are high (NCTAF, 2009). Teachers are often ineffective because they lack knowledge of the curricula, policies, and expectations of the district. NCTAF (2007) recognizes that a big part of the teacher's job is learning the policies and procedures of the school and the district in which they are working, becoming acclimated to the climate of the school, and becoming familiar with the culture of the community. All this must be done while also assuming the monumental responsibility of teaching students.

Administrative support can greatly affect the rate of teacher attrition in a school setting. When teachers feel a part of the process, they are often more willing to stay. "Administrators have a great deal of influence over school climate and teacher efficacy," (Ferriter & Norton, 2004, p. 19). Minarik, Thornton, and Perreault (2003) believe that administrators should create more democratic environments and the commanding attitudes should be eliminated. Administrators should support and encourage open two-way communication, shared leadership, and allow the teachers to feel a sense of empowerment (Minarik et al., 2003).

As Ferriter and Norton (2004) state, administrators who are supportive and accessible are the most effective, and when these individuals develop positive relationships with the faculty, everyone, including parents and students, benefit from the collegiality. Darling-Hammond (2003) has written that effective school leadership has a "magnetic effect" that is capable of attracting accomplished teachers who are searching for environments that will allow them to reach their peak performance level. A lack of administrative support has been identified as a key factor in teacher attrition (Greiner & Smith, 2009). Simply stated, the retention and development of quality teachers must be the responsibility of the administrator.

The Study

A qualitative study was conducted to determine why teachers leave their teaching positions. The purpose of this study was mainly to determine what can be done to improve the retention rate of teachers and to identify support systems that teachers need in order to be successful in their careers. Looking at why teachers leave provides insight into what school districts can do to help them stay.

Twelve former public school teachers from one school district in the Eastern United States agreed to be interviewed for this research. Eight women and four men participated in the study. Of the twelve, six taught at the elementary level in the district, while five taught at the district's middle and high schools, and one was a specialist. Collectively, these 12 educators dedicated a total of more than 135 years of service to the school district. Participants were interviewed individually in order to determine factors that influence teachers to leave their positions. Within the first few moments of the interview, most of the

participants acknowledged deep feelings toward the district and spoke of their teaching experience there as a pivotal chapter in their lives. The participants also told, however, their stories of why they left the district and their opinions of what district administrators could do to improve the working conditions and increase teacher retention within the district.

Findings Collegial Support

Teachers cannot work alone—they need support in order to feel successful (Abdallah, 2009). The old adage that no man is an island rings especially true in the field of education. Encouragement and support can be instrumental in determining whether a teacher leaves a school district or the field of education altogether. As participants of this study discussed their feelings of support, it became apparent that they believe support comes from a variety of sources.

During the interviews, many spoke of the support that they received by fellow teachers. The large majority of participants did feel supported by their colleagues. The words “colleagues” and “friends” were often used interchangeably during the interviews. Most of the participants became very close to colleagues during their time in the district and the collegial support they received from other teachers had a tremendous impact on them. Often, participants would talk about the way their colleagues helped them, especially when they were new to the district and to teaching. One participant spoke of this in great detail; although she stated that she does not miss teaching, she does miss her former colleagues; “I miss the camaraderie of the teachers. When you work together with everybody you build a good rapport in the school and the school works together as a team. It is something you miss when you get out into the world.” Participants spoke often of how having the support of colleagues kept them motivated, and, in some instances, the friendships and collegiality they had with those they worked with kept them in the district for longer than they might have stayed otherwise.

Administrative Support

All of the participants discussed the administration they worked for while in the district. The feelings of the administration and their perceived levels of support varied, however. Some participants reflected that for them, a lack of administrative support and a high turnover rate of administrative staff became difficult aspects of teaching in the district. Others considered the administrators to be a great support system. While some remembered their principals as knowledgeable, hard-working individuals, others remembered their administrators in a more negative manner.

Several participants spoke specifically of administrators who helped and supported them, and gave praise to principals who were open to change and encouraged teachers to try new strategies and techniques, stating that a few administrators were “balanced” and “fair,” and who “you [could] lean on for help in the classroom.” Yet, most of the participants spoke of the lack of support they felt from the administrators with whom they worked.

One former teacher had a great deal to say about administrative support. In reflecting on the administrators she worked with, she spoke of principals whom she “dearly loved” and others who she felt “did not care about...the teachers.” Earlier in her teaching career, she felt that the school and district leaders noticed if teachers were “going above and beyond the call of duty,” but as the years went by, she felt that no one noticed anymore.

This study participant also believes that the administration would, in years past, listen to the teachers and their concerns, but said that she saw that diminish in her last several years in the district. “I felt like I had a say... and they listened to what I said. And they [the administration] had the attitude, ‘Yes, we are administrators, but you are on the front line and we really want to hear what you say and take it to heart.’” This long-term educator said that in recent years she sensed that the administrators stopped being as focused on the teachers, and this led to her feeling unsupported. At the beginning of her career, she believed that the specialists “were looked at as a vital part of the curriculum,” but as the years went by, she felt less appreciated.

The participants of this study spoke candidly about the administrative support they received while working in the district. Some described their experiences with caring and helpful administrators who supported them and made them into the educational leaders they are today. Others spoke of times when they felt alone and without administrative support. It became consistently apparent through these interviews that these teachers wanted to be treated as valued and respected members of the school and needed to feel supported by their administration.

Many of the participants reflected on administrators’ personalities and how the principals’ communicative skills shape the school climate. The differences in administrators became a factor in several of the participants’ decisions to leave. It was interesting to notice that the participants all had varying perceptions of what qualifies a person as an administrative leader, but words such as “friendly,” “fair,” and “supported” were constantly repeated by the participants when describing administrators they admired and respected. One participant jokingly said that there are so many standards placed on teachers today that perhaps there should be “personality standards” placed on the principals who oversee the schools. Although she laughed as she said that, she was serious when she reiterated that she feels administrators whose personalities clash with the personality styles of their subordinates will not produce an effective learning and working environment.

Often, the participants alluded to a seemingly endless parade of administrators who had come and gone, and on more than one occasion the term “revolving door” was used when describing this lack of administrative consistency. Most participants worked with several administrators during their time in the district and for many, the change in leadership occurred on an almost yearly basis. One recalled that these administrative changes were very “hard” on the teachers, as they had to continually make adjustments to “new rules [and] new philosophies of teaching.” For many of the teachers interviewed, this lack of administrative continuity played a pivotal role in their decisions to leave their positions.

High-stakes Assessment and Academic Freedom

During the time that most participants taught in the district, new academic programs were added to help improve student test scores. As the demands around accountability increased, many of the teachers also felt the stress of teaching increase. Some participants spoke at great lengths about high-stakes assessment and academic freedom. One spoke of how changes in accountability indicators enhanced her decision to leave the teaching profession. Because she taught for 20 years, she saw the changes in expectations through the years and spoke candidly about her unhappiness in the years prior to her resignation. Early in her career, she felt that being spontaneous and creative in the classroom lent itself to wonderful “teachable moments.” During the last few years in the classroom, however, she felt unable to stray from the curriculum guides and high-stakes tests. She went on to say:

I felt like my creativity was taken out of the classroom. And...what I was doing in my room, you could walk down to the next classroom and see the exact same thing happening and the exact same thing in another room and...that is not what I went into teaching for.

Although the participants acknowledged the need for standards and accountability, many questioned whether doing everything exactly the same is really beneficial for the students. Several participants felt that when their creativity and academic freedom were taken away, it left them with a declining sense of pride in their work. As one said, "Yes, check me, make sure that I am following the guidelines and that I am meeting the standards, but let me do it and prove to you [that] I can do it with my own creative ways." These participants have seen firsthand how the changes in testing and increased accountability have changed the roles of teachers. In addition, this lack of professional autonomy had a negative impact on teacher morale, and was an issue addressed by several of the participants during their interviews. For some, a lack of morale increased their desire to leave the district. As one participant put it, "morale is allowing others to control how you feel." Another, recalling his time in the district, found morale to be "something that was lacking." One former teacher saw a significant number of teachers resign from their positions; in just over a decade, this individual saw 35 teachers leave the school. Several of the participants discussed how seeing a high turnover of teachers allowed for teachers' morale to weaken.

According to many of the participants, the district must play a part in the building up of morale in teachers and feel that being valued and appreciated is a key component in keeping teachers. While being interviewed, one veteran of education discussed how teachers are not recognized for what they do while another spoke of how she began to feel less valued and appreciated through her time in the school district, causing her morale to plummet. The participants of this study all felt the stresses of teaching, and for some, these stresses led to feelings of frustration. The candidates spoke candidly about the increase of stress in teaching.

What Can We Learn from This Study?

When asked for their opinions of how the district can improve teaching retention, many of the participants' responses were similar. Because so many of the teachers felt a lack of support during their time in the district, they surmised that supportive measures will increase the retention of teachers. The term "support" was defined in many different forms.

One study participant spoke of the support that teachers need in order to find validation for their work and dedication. She believes that students "learn best, are eager to please, and become successful" when they are placed in a positive classroom environment. The same, she feels, holds true for adults. When asked what the district can do to encourage teachers to stay, she did not hesitate in her response:

One way...to keep...teachers in today's society, I believe, is to be sure that the school's climate is positive and full of high morale. Some people believe that personal rewards are intrinsic, but we all need to remember that one of the greatest human needs is the need to feel important. Just as children need to feel important in the classroom, adults also need to feel loved,...supported, respected, and acknowledged. Another teacher agreed, saying, "If you're miserable going to work every day, you are not going to want to go there very long."

Perhaps one participant said it best for the entire group when she said:

I think they [the district administrators] need to listen to the voices of their teachers. Teachers are the ones that are on the front line. They are the ones that are actually putting all of these policies into practice. So I think they [administrators] need to say [to the teachers] in a non-threatening way, "Tell me your opinion on this. What's working? What's not working? What do you think would help?"

New teacher mentoring was an issue addressed by several participants. The new teacher mentoring program allocated by the state is designed to offer support and guidance to new teachers. However, the program cannot give all the support that is needed; novice teachers need help and encouragement from their colleagues and supervisors. One participant discussed how the concept of effective mentoring is void if there is no collaboration between the mentor and the new teacher. He said that a "buddy approach" is paramount in building a positive relationship. Another, however, remarked that more should be done to give new teachers the support they need. She reflected that she saw a lot of pressure being placed upon these inexperienced teachers and she felt that the district was not giving them the "back-up" that they needed.

A former high-school teacher shared how he feels the district does a disservice to its new employees by giving them too many responsibilities. He feels that "slowly working new teachers into the system" will enhance their teaching, giving them the desire to stay. "The new teachers usually end up with some of the hardest classes to deal with, discipline wise, [and] they end up with the largest classes." He suggested that giving new teachers an "easier" schedule when they first begin may be helpful.

Conclusion

The findings of this study echo and support those found in previous studies of teacher attrition issues. Studies have repeatedly shown that a teacher's working conditions, including administrative support, is a significant factor in teacher retention (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Ingersoll (2003) found a lack of administrative support and a lack of influence in decision making as two major reasons teachers leave. The teachers in this study also cite these as reasons for leaving their teaching positions. School districts must evaluate the administrative structures in their districts and find ways to build leadership capacity. Leadership programs must also develop effective preparation programs that train engaged and high quality administrators who can provide teachers with the support and recognition necessary for their success. Also, NCTAF (2009) proposes that building collaborative learning teams that will provide support and collegiality for all teachers as a potential solution for the ever growing problem of teacher attrition.

The question of why teachers leave the field does not have a simple answer. The complexity of this debate rages on, causing many to tire of the subject entirely. Still others do not find teacher retention to be a pivotal problem during economic downturn because workers often cling to their jobs due to fear and uncertainty. Yet while it is true that the teacher shortage is not *quite* as prevalent during times of recession, the facts remain that many teachers are still leaving their jobs, and year after year after year this great exodus continues. It is also important to point out that teaching is a career that requires skill, knowledge, and understanding. When teachers are unhappy or discontented, the ones who ultimately suffer are the children with whom they work on a daily basis. Simply stated, America cannot afford anything less than the best when it comes to teaching our children. But why do we often give less to teachers, when they are the ones we need the most?

School and district leaders need to be supportive of the work that teachers are doing with and for the students. Teachers need to feel valued and appreciated and want to know that they do make a difference. It is evident by this study that all teachers, novice and experienced felt they needed that professional support. Allowing teachers to form relationships with one another may offer a great support system. New teachers can be reassured that other teachers are there to help them, while veteran teachers can receive encouragement and support in learning new teaching strategies. Teachers need adequate time to plan lessons and discuss curriculum. Teaching is described as a lonely profession, and teachers need optimal time to professionally talk with one another.

Teachers also need to have a say in decisions that will impact them. Because teachers have the responsibility of instructing, they know firsthand what developmentally appropriate practices work best for the students in their classrooms. Allowing teachers to be a part of decision-making practices in their schools could go a long way in helping teachers feel appreciated.

Just as learning should be enjoyable, so should teaching. Scripted, prepackaged lessons are now being used in schools throughout the nation to ensure that state and federal mandates are being met. While these are essential, it is important for district administrators to help find ways for teachers to have some semblance of autonomy while still adhering to district, state, and federal mandates. Providing teachers a voice in how they teach may create a better and more democratic learning environment.

Without question, teaching is a demanding profession and a career not suited for everyone. Yet, we can attract and retain individuals who are willing to work diligently if we give them support and give them a say in what works best for educating children. While teacher induction and mentoring programs offer many benefits to new teachers, this study serves as a reminder that the school culture and environment is equally if not more important in retaining high quality teachers and building effective schools.

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